

Past is Prologue: WWII Dutch Life under Nazi Occupation and the Cost of Liberation

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While American steel, British intelligence, and Russian blood won World War Two, it was the Dutch who emerged as pivotal players in shaping the postwar world. Dutch foreign policy has evolved dramatically since the 1600s, but the 20th century saw the most drastic change. Thanks to the punitive Nazi regime, failure of Dutch resistance, and their bond with American troops, what was once an isolationist and neutral state became the global leader for international cooperation. In the years after WWII their experiences allowed them to assume a vital role in the establishment of the UN, EU, NATO, and the Geneva Conventions, creating an era of unprecedented peace and international cooperation.

Because of the unique geopolitics of the Netherlands, Dutch foreign policy has always stressed the importance of independence, tolerance, and, most importantly, cooperation, three values that have become core pillars of modern Dutch diplomacy. The Netherlands was born in bloodshed, achieving independence from the Spanish Habsburgs in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.¹ Before the war, the Netherlands was made up of small, religiously, politically, and culturally distinct states.² The pressure of war, however, welded these disparate regions together in the monumental Union of Utrecht, which created the first successful act of religious toleration in Western Europe.³ Religious toleration was baked into Dutch society, and their unity allowed them to overcome overwhelming odds and defeat the Spanish Habsburgs, but it was not smooth sailing from then on. Trapped between competing powers over the following three centuries, the

¹ L. Gross, "The Peace of Westphalia, 1648-1948," *The American Journal of International Law*, 42(1), p.20.

² Editorial, "Union of Utrecht (1579) – Political alliance of the Northern provinces," *Historiek*, January 28, 2022, <https://historiek.net/unie-van-utrecht-1579-betekenis/74900/>.

³ *Ibid.*

Dutch placed value on independence to maintain their sovereignty in the face of external threats.⁴ They became a neutral state, aloof from and unentangled from European power politics. It is not that the Dutch were unarmed; quite the opposite—they maintained a large, modernized, standing army and specifically created a trade empire to secure their national borders.⁵

To maintain their independence, the Dutch have consistently advocated for a reduction of tensions, and an increase in international cooperation. Hugo Grotius was a pivotal figure in this movement. He wrote the influential *On the Law of War and Peace*, the first text to question the legality and methods of civilized warfare and the first to regulate it.⁶ Grotius’s work became a point of national pride for the Dutch, and the whole Grotius collection is housed in the historic Peace Palace.⁷ In the 19th and 20th centuries, *Law of War* became an integral pillar of Dutch foreign policy theory. Concerned with rising militarism, the Netherlands hosted the Hague Convention of 1899.⁸ This convention attempted to ban the use of inhumane weapons and avoid war by reducing national stockpiles.⁹ The summit also created the first truly multinational arbitration court, the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which still exists today.¹⁰ Contrary to

⁴ Wim Klinkert, “‘In the interest of peace and quiet in Europe’: The military and strategic role of Dutch neutrality, 1890-1940,” *Journal of Modern European History*, 17(1), (2019): 48. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1611894418820254>.

⁵ Pepijn Brandon, “The Armed Forces,” Chapter. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Dutch Golden Age*, edited by Helmer J. Helmers and Geert H. Janssen, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 69-86.

⁶ Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷ “Grotius Collection,” Peace Palace Library, <https://peacepalacelibrary.nl/grotius-collection>.

⁸ “Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land,” July 29, 1899, *Hague II*, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/hague02.asp.

⁹ Grotius, *Law of War*.

¹⁰ “Pacific Settlement of International Disputes,” July 29, 1899, *Hague I*, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/hague01.asp.

modern multinational organizations, the conference did not attempt to prevent war between the signatories; it was only intended to prevent needless bloodshed in case of war, as Grotius described.¹¹ The themes and failures of the Hague Convention laid the groundwork for the modern Dutch state.

WWI caused a diplomatic crisis of faith for the Netherlands. Armed neutrality forced the government to waste money maintaining defenses against both the British and Germans that could have been used elsewhere. 200,000 soldiers remained mobilized for the length of hostilities, and the Dutch were forced to support Belgian and German refugees fleeing the conflict—more than a million in all.¹² Both of these factors caused a drastic downturn in the Dutch economy.¹³ In spite of their acknowledgement that in WWI, the army prevented invasion, the government continuously refused to fund the army, falsely believing that, despite their strategically important location in Europe, no nation would threaten war with them.¹⁴ The inevitable result was that, in the interwar period, the Dutch severely limited their armed forces, to the point that they were unprepared for the Nazi juggernaut.¹⁵

Despite the common idea that Europe in the interbellum was disarmed, the opposite is true. Trade barriers and rearmament created a tense and competitive environment more akin to the crises of the 1900s than the postwar prosperity of the 1950s. If at this point the Dutch had broken down national barriers to lift the continent as a whole, WWII may not have happened, but

¹¹ Grotius, *Rights of War*.

¹² Fergus O’Sullivan, “Neutrality At All Costs: The Netherlands in WW1,” *History Guild*, January 17, 2021, <https://historyguild.org/neutrality-at-all-costs-the-netherlands-in-ww1/>.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 53.

¹⁵ Klinkert, “Dutch Neutrality 1890-1940,” 49.

at this point Dutch foreign policy had regressed to oxymoronic armed neutrality without the military to support it. They believed that they alone could never pose a threat to a major power, but they neither built up alliances nor acknowledged the rising threat on their doorstep.¹⁶

When the Nazis invaded, it took only five days for the Dutch to surrender, but it was not an easy fight.¹⁷ They capitulated only after the Luftwaffe leveled the historic city of Rotterdam, and the Dutch army roughly inflicted equal casualties upon the advancing Wehrmacht.¹⁸ The resistance they faced caused momentary panic in the Wehrmacht leadership, and their failure to capture or kill anyone in the Dutch government would hound them for the duration of the occupation.¹⁹ This proves that had the lowlands been armed and prepared for a conflict, or in a collective security agreement, it's possible they could have held off the Nazis and prevented the fall of France.

Life under Nazi occupation remained normal for most Dutch citizens, but it was especially terrible for Dutch Jews. Unlike other occupied areas, the occupation of the Netherlands was run by a civil government and not the Wehrmacht. This was because the Nazis viewed the Dutch as their “Aryan brothers” and treated them accordingly, trying to set up native Nazi parties.²⁰ However, due in large part to their inability to capture the Dutch government,

¹⁶ Ibid, 54.

¹⁷ “U.S. Contribution to the Liberation of the Netherlands,” *US Embassy of The Netherlands*, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://nl.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/75-years-of-liberation-of-the-netherlands-75liberationonnl/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “The German Invasion of the Netherlands,” *Anne Frank House*, accessed April 24, 2023. <https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/go-in-depth/german-invasion-netherlands/>.

²⁰ Samuel P. Oliner, *Altruistic Personality: Rescuers Of Jews In Nazi Europe*, (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 30.

these never had the support of the people. Much like in Paris, there was a sense of normalcy, and like in France, many Dutch, believing the Germans would win, became collaborators, turning in their fellow Dutch to curry favor with the SS.²¹ Religious registration was weaponized, giving the SS easy access to Dutch Jews, who uniquely suffered in the occupied Netherlands, which experienced the highest percent of holocaust victims in western Europe.²² The most famous of which was Anne Frank, a teen Holocaust victim made famous by her diary.²³ She envisioned a world where people could come together to work for peace.²⁴ Anne Frank’s legacy is in many ways the lesson of Dutch Resistance in WWII—it is never enough to simply resist, humanity must be proactive in preventing the rise of authoritarianism to protect the innocent.²⁵

Contrary to the myth of WWII, in the Netherlands and France, only a small minority were willing to risk their lives to join the resistance.²⁶ As a result, their movements never proved more than a nuisance, and they could not liberate themselves. However, as the war continued and the Germans looked certain to lose, resistance increased. Realizing the Dutch would not cooperate any longer, the Germans escalated economic exploitation. Much like in France, one of

²¹ Saskia Hansen and Julia Zarankin, “A Founding Myth for the Netherlands: The Second World War and the Victimization of Dutch Jews,” In *Reflections on the Holocaust*, edited by Julia Zarankin, (New York: Humanity in Action, Inc. and authors, 2011), 106-117.

²² “The Netherlands: the highest number of Jewish victims in Western Europe,” *Anne Frank House*, accessed April 25, 2023. <https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/go-in-depth/netherlands-greatest-number-jewish-victims-western-europe/>.

²³ “Anne, from Diarist to Icon,” *Anne Frank House*, accessed April 25, 2023. <https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/go-in-depth/anne-diarist-icon/>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Hansen and Zarankin, “Founding Myth,” in *Reflections of the Holocaust*, 106-117.

the most hated policies was Arbeitseinsatz, the use of able-bodied young men as slave labor for the Nazis.²⁷ In the final winter before liberation, the Nazis were desperate enough to cut off food and fuel supplies to the population, redirecting them as Wehrmacht rations, leading to what the Dutch call the *Hongerwinter*. During the winter of 1944, an estimated 18,000 Dutch starved to death.²⁸ This cemented in the minds of the Dutch the failure of both neutrality and resistance, as resistance movements were largely unable to prevent *Hongerwinter*, and the government was unable to save the Netherlands from occupation.

American soldiers were instrumental in freeing the Netherlands and bringing about a Dutch vision of international relations. Near the town of Margraten, the Netherlands American Cemetery memorializes more than eight thousand Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice in the fight against the Nazis.²⁹ They joined some two thousand members of the Dutch resistance who fell in the fight for independence.³⁰ The successful advance of allied forces required the assistance and cooperation of the locals, who overwhelmingly welcomed their liberators with celebration.³¹ “Can you imagine how we wept when we could shake hands with the first American boys?” the mayor of the small town of Margraten later said.³² During Operation

²⁷ Herbert Ulrick, *Hitler’s Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany under the Third Reich*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²⁸ Henri A. Van Der Zee, *The Hunger Winter: Occupied Holland 1944–1945*, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), pp. 304–05.

²⁹ “Netherlands American Cemetery,” *American Battle Monuments Commission*, accessed April 23, 2023. <https://www.abmc.gov/Netherlands>.

³⁰ Role of Honor of the Fallen 1940-1945, accessed April 23, 2023. <https://www.erelijst.nl/>.

³¹ Joseph James Shomon, *Crosses in the Wind*, (United States: Stratford House Inc, 1947), 55-57.

³² Mieke Kirkels, Chris Dickon, and Sebastiaan Vonk, *Dutch Children of African American Liberators: Race, Military Policy and Identity in World War II and Beyond*, (United States: McFarland & Co Inc, 2020), 46.

Plunder, the Ninth took heavy losses, and more than a thousand men were buried at Margraten.³³ Overwhelmed by the dead, the Graves Registration Service could never have provided honorable burials without the assistance of the locals. Because of Dutch assistance, the Ninth was the only army group to never open a cemetery on German soil; the dead were hauled over 400 miles to Margraten, where they were identified and buried.³⁴ By V-E Day, more than seventeen thousand men rested there, including both Americans and Germans.³⁵ Joseph James Shomon, CO of the 611th Graves Registration Company, claimed that the Margraten cemetery had become the largest war cemetery in the world, thanks to the assistance of the Dutch.³⁶

After a large ceremony, the work of repatriating the bodies began in earnest.³⁷ For many of the service members remaining, Dutch families have “adopted” their graves, tending to the plots of forgotten and neglected soldiers as their own.³⁸ With the end of the war, the ninth graves registration corps said their tearful goodbyes to the people of Margraten, and left for other assignments, but the bond between the Dutch people and their American liberators is undeniable, contributing to the cordial relations that the US and Netherlands enjoy today.

After the liberation of the Netherlands by American forces in 1945, the Dutch went forward into the world guided by their experience under Nazi occupation. They played a vital role in the establishment of the EU, UN, NATO, and the Geneva Conventions, believing that cooperation between democracies is necessary to ensure the peaceful self-determination of

³³ Shomon, *Crosses*, 107-108.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 109.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 127.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 133-134.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 125.

peoples. In 1952, the Netherlands created the European Coal and Steel Community, the foundation of the EU, believing that countries with mutual economic interests would not come into conflict.³⁹ The UN was similarly created to avoid another world war through peaceful arbitration, with the Netherlands as a founding member.⁴⁰ The Netherlands was also a founding member of NATO, and has made their cooperation in all three international organizations the foundation of their modern foreign policy.⁴¹ Another core tenant of their international relations is a commitment to international law.⁴² The Hague has earned the nickname “The International City of Peace and Justice” because of the overwhelming number of international headquarters located there, including but not limited to the ICC, ICJ, and ICTY.⁴³ In 1948, they were an integral proponent of the Geneva Conventions on genocide.⁴⁴ The occupation of the Netherlands forced the Dutch to reevaluate their international relations, and as a result, they have foregone neutrality as a way of achieving lasting peace, forging bonds between nations, and standing united against totalitarian regimes.

³⁹ “The Netherlands: EU member state,” *Government of the Netherlands*, accessed May 1, 2023. <https://www.government.nl/topics/european-union/the-netherlands-eu-member-state>.

⁴⁰ “Founding Member States,” *United Nations*, accessed May 1, 2023. <https://research.un.org/en/unmembers/founders>.

⁴¹ “The Netherlands and NATO,” *NATO*, accessed May 1, 2023. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_162354.htm.

⁴² “International Peace and Security,” *Government of the Netherlands*, accessed May 1, 2023. <https://www.government.nl/topics/international-peace-and-security/international-legal-order>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

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Yale. 1899. "Pacific Settlement of International Disputes (Hague I); July 29, 1899." In *Laws of War*. The Hague: Hague Convention.
https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/hague01.asp.